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Innovative housing supports to prevent homelessness for young women transitioning from residential out-of-home care in Victoria: A case study of the Bridge It Cocoon programPhilip Mendes¹ *Kate Mackenzie²Sarah Morris¹**Affiliations**¹ Department Social Work, Monash University, Melbourne, Vic. 3073, Australia² Bridge It, Melbourne, Vic. 3182, Australia**Correspondence***Prof Philip Mendes philip.mendes@monash.edu

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Abstract

Young people transitioning from out-of-home care (known as care leavers) are, globally, a vulnerable group, and many experience housing instability and homelessness. In 2021, the State of Victoria extended out-of-home-care supports from 18 to 21 years, including introduction of a housing allowance for all care leavers. Yet, many of this cohort – particularly those leaving residential group home care – still struggle to access safe and affordable housing. In response, the Bridge It charity established the co-designed Cocoon model in the Melbourne suburb of St Kilda via philanthropic funding to provide a home and community to young women aged 16–21 years leaving residential care, as well as other young women and gender-diverse people who have experienced homelessness. This paper draws on three external and internal evaluation studies that used mixed methods to examine the impact of the Cocoon program, including interviews with current and former residents, interviews with current Cocoon workers and client outcome data. The findings indicate the effectiveness of the Cocoon model in enabling positive outcomes for the young women in key areas such as housing, education and employment, mental health, life skills, social and community relationships and family reunification.

Keywords:

care leavers, housing, residential care, social and community connections.

Introduction

Young people transitioning from out-of-home care (OOHC), often called care leavers or care-experienced youth, are known globally to be a vulnerable group (Refaeli & Mann-Feder, 2026). Many experience forms of housing instability and homelessness, as evidenced by Australian research studies (Innes et al., 2025; Zhao & Waugh, 2025). For example, a national study, based on consultations with 325 care leavers aged 18–25 years, reported that 30% of the young people experienced homelessness in the first year after their transition from OOHC. This is a problem that does not seem to improve over time (McDowall, 2021).

Similarly, a study based on linked administrative data on 1,848 Victorian care leavers aged 15–21 years during 2013 and 2014, found that 54% of youth had experienced homelessness in the 4 years after leaving care (Martin et al., 2021). Additionally, a global scoping review of the experiences of young women transitioning from residential out-of-home care found that they were particularly vulnerable to homelessness, and likely to experience poorer housing outcomes than their peers exiting foster care (Zhao et al., 2025).

In addition to the availability of housing, another key variable influencing outcomes for care leavers is access to what is called 'social capital', which is broadly defined as supportive social relationships, connections and networks (Waugh et al., 2024).

To date, there is limited Australian research evidence examining models of support for young women exiting residential out-of-home care. This paper addresses this knowledge gap by examining the specific housing and social connection supports provided by the Bridge It program in the State of Victoria.

The Victorian policy context

In response to the Home Stretch advocacy campaign, the State of Victoria introduced extended out-of-home-care supports from 18 to 21 years (i.e. the Better Futures Program), including introduction of an Independent Accommodation Allowance funded at \$16,065 a year for all care leavers. That allowance can be accessed by care leavers who are able to stay in existing foster or kinship care arrangements, those who choose to depart foster and kinship care and also those who have to leave residential care group homes at no later than 18 years old (Mendes et al., 2025).

However, there is still no guarantee of secure housing, particularly for those leaving residential care, transitioning from youth justice orders, or who have complex needs or disability. As a result, the Victorian Government introduced an additional Housing First program in 2023 to assist up to 225 youth aged 16–18 years leaving residential care or custodial settings, or at risk of homelessness. That cohort (including 47 First Nations youth supported by a local Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation) receive 2 years of housing funding and a further year of outreach casework assistance to enable them to attain sustainable alternative accommodation (DFFH, 2025). Nevertheless, that cohort still comprise less than a quarter of the total number of annual care leavers in Victoria, which was estimated at 937 in 2021–2022 (AIHW, 2023). It also seems that the guaranteed

housing does not continue past 18 or, at best, 19 years of age and, as a consequence, many care leavers will continue to struggle to access safe and affordable housing.

To address this unmet need, several non-government organisations (NGOs) in Victoria have established new housing support models. Some of these programs specifically target care leavers, while others, such as the Foyer model, assist care leavers as one sub-cohort of a wider homeless youth population (Jefferson & Stone, 2023; Mendes et al., 2026; Sach & Baidawi, 2026).

In 2022, Victorian-based charity Bridge It established the Cocoon model in the inner-city suburb of St Kilda via philanthropic funding to provide a home and support community for young women aged 16–21 years leaving residential care, and other female-identifying and gender-diverse young people who were National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) participants or at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Bridge It describe the model as being informed by co-design processes (Yeates & Amaya, 2018) in that they continuously engage with residents to ensure the application of lived experience voices and knowledge in ongoing review of their program framework and supports (Bridge It, 2025). The Cocoon comprises 16 fully self-contained apartments in a large heritage-listed building with access to shared group spaces. Its creation was actively informed by research evidence (e.g. (Martin et al., 2021) documenting the high level of housing instability experienced by young adult care leavers and the cost-effectiveness of early intervention programs to meet their needs (Bridge It, 2023).

The interior and exterior design of the building is an important aspect of the Cocoon, and was informed by consultation with an occupational therapist, combined with a commitment to create a beautiful, calming and welcoming environment. The Cocoon is based on five core principles: (1) housing first as a basis for advancing other life outcomes; (2) strengths-based and (3) trauma-informed care; (4) individualised and youth-centred supports; and (5) lived experience youth choice and voice (SVA Consulting, 2023).

The Cocoon is informed by a theory of change that identifies the availability of secure long-term and high quality housing for approximately 18 months as a key strategy to enable young women who have experienced childhood adversity to recover from trauma, and advance goals concerning education, employment and functional relationships with a view to ending pathways to homelessness. Key service components include a Lived Experience Mentor who promotes hope, connection and personal wellbeing; group activities, including social outings and movie nights; life skills training in areas such as cooking, cleaning, budgeting and shopping; forms of therapy, such as yoga, massage, acupuncture and meditation, to boost mental health healing; tailored goal planning to assist the young women to access education and employment; and referrals to relevant support services, such as education, training and transitional housing programs (SVA Consulting, 2023).

The Cocoon actively seeks feedback informally from residents throughout their stay, and also through its Butterfly Program and Lived Insight Team (formal programs established in October 2025

for current and previous residents to participate in co-design and program delivery) to enable program improvement. Bridge It also established a formal Lived Experience Advisory Committee consisting of care-experienced advocates and current residents in early 2024 to assist effective service operation and planning (Bridge It, 2025; Morris, 2025).

The Cocoon accepts residents who identify as young women and gender-diverse people (Bridge It, 2023). The program hosted 11 young people aged 17–23 years in the first 12 months. Five identified as part of the LGBTIQ+ community, and two identified as gender diverse. Ten of the young people had exited forms of OOHC, and two were NDIS participants. The majority were Australian born and two people were from cultural and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. The cohort included two people who identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. All 11 had mental health challenges, 10 had experienced homelessness, 10 had been exposed to family violence, and three had a history of problematic substance use (Morris, 2025; SVA Consulting, 2023).

Following a renovation and short-term closure of the Cocoon site, the second cohort, termed Cocoon 2.0, included 23 young women and gender-diverse people aged 16–21 years. Some of the Bridge It reports present their demographic details in percentages only rather than precise numbers, as for the first resident group above. Five identified as part of the LGBTIQ+ community and five as gender diverse. They included a mixture of Australian born, CALD backgrounds, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. Eight had exited forms of OOHC, most had experiences of both family violence and homelessness, and two had refugee or asylum-seeker backgrounds (Morris, 2025; Bridge It, 2025).

In total, since its formation, the Cocoon has accommodated 34 residents and currently (as of December 2025), has 15 residents. In total, 27/34 residents experienced homelessness, 30 experienced family violence, 20 exited the out-of-home care system, 18 have CALD backgrounds, six have a First Nations background, 11 identify as part of the LGBTIQ+ community, seven identify as gender diverse, six are NDIS participants and two are refugees or asylum seekers (Bridge It, 2025).

This paper examines the experiences and outcomes for the cohort of young women supported by the Cocoon program.

Methods

This paper draws on three discrete external and internal research studies that used mixed qualitative and quantitative methods including interviews with current and former residents, interviews with Cocoon workers, a survey of residents and client outcome data to examine the impact of the Cocoon program.

Study One was an independently commissioned evaluation conducted by Social Ventures Australia (SVA) of the short–medium-term outcomes of the program, covering the first year of operation. SVA researchers, actively assisted by the Cocoon Lived Experience Mentor, completed interviews with program staff, residents, academic experts including Author One and corporate

partners. They also reviewed internal data, including the results of surveys of residents. The study did not seek formal approval via a Human Research Ethics Committee but, nevertheless, provided detailed study information to residents and sought verbal consent to participate. All residents interviewed were provided with a \$50 cash reimbursement as appreciation for their time (SVA Consulting, 2023).

Study Two was a minor research thesis completed by a Monash University Master of Social Work research student that also examined the resident outcomes from the first year of the program. That study employed two methods: semi-structured interviews with five staff holding four different roles within the program, and the collection of de-identified client outcome data recorded internally. Drawing on research findings that highlight the important role played by informal social and community relationships and networks in facilitating positive transitions from OOHC (Purtell et al., 2019; Stubbs et al., 2023), this study sought to examine the impact of the Cocoon model on the social and community connections of young care leavers. The Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee approved the data collection (approval number 44377), which included a formal explanatory statement and consent process (Going, 2024).

Study Three is an ongoing internal evaluation by a lived experience researcher of two Cocoon cohorts. This evaluation included interviews with residents that examined seven life domains: creating homes; independent living skills; health and wellbeing; education and employment; social connectedness and relationships; personal achievements; and satisfaction. Additionally, this study involved collecting quantitative data via a survey of residents pertaining to housing, social relationships and participation, employment and education, finances, health and wellbeing and personal satisfaction (Morris, 2024). This evaluation also plans to conduct interviews with staff, but they had not been completed at the time of writing.

Part one of Study Three included interviews to examine the experiences of two young women who participated in the pilot Cocoon program. Part two involved interviews to explore the experiences of 14 young women who participated in Cocoon 2.0. Initial interviews were conducted close to intake into the Cocoon and then follow-up interviews were conducted from 9 months within the program (aside from new residents). Part three analysed the experiences of 14 participants through qualitative interviews and quantitative data collected by Bridge It across all Cocoon 2.0 residents (Morris, 2025). This evaluation study did not seek formal approval via a Human Research Ethics Committee but, nevertheless, provided detailed study information to residents, and sought informed verbal consent to participate. All young people interviewed were provided with a \$50 cash reimbursement as appreciation for their time (Morris, 2024).

Results

Study One

The SVA evaluation reported that the program had been effective in advancing positive outcomes for the 11 initial residents, in areas including: housing stability; life skills development in areas such as

budgeting and cooking; enhanced social relationships; improved mental health; and accessing education or employment. In particular, four of the young women accessed first-time employment, three who had engaged in high-risk substance use had reduced their involvement, four had reconnected with education and one continued existing education, eight who had experienced mental health challenges were feeling better, and all those who exited the Cocoon had attained preferred housing options, such as community housing or private rental (SVA Consulting, 2023).

Residents reported that the Cocoon had provided 'access to stable housing', and provided a sense of 'feeling at home' and being 'supported by trusted staff'. Their feedback included comments such as:

It's a home away from home.

It provides a space for community.

It's really relaxing. (SVA Consulting, 2023: p. 25)

Residents also reported that the Cocoon had enhanced their learning of independent living skills. Their feedback included the following:

It's been a place I can learn to live independently ... I feel more confident at being able to look after myself.

I feel ready to think about what comes next.

I feel I can be my own person and make my own choices ...

I can take better care of myself. (SVA Consulting, 2023: p. 26)

There were also some negative experiences, such as conflict with other residents, which impacted adversely on residents' mental health (SVA Consulting, 2023).

The evaluators indicated that the program was cost effective, asserting that the average annual cost of \$60,000 per resident was about mid-range compared with other similar housing support programs, and the costs would be outweighed by the documented benefits, such as reducing involvement in expensive crisis service systems including criminal justice and homelessness (SVA Consulting, 2023).

Study Two

The student study's analysis of de-identified client outcome data reported a range of positive findings. All 11 residents attained stable housing on exiting the program, including seven entering community housing, three securing private rental and one involved in family reunification. In addition, nine residents reported improvements in mental health; eight residents indicated improving social relationships; nine residents improved their living skills; seven residents were actively engaged in education; and six residents acquired employment in the community services sector. Other positive outcomes noted by staff included gaining a driving licence and buying a car, connecting with regular physical and mental health support services and finding a partner (Going, 2024).

The interviews with staff also identified several positive outcomes, including: assisting the young people to access employment opportunities through supportive organisations such as a café and hospitality training program; using group programs and outings to

establish connections with the local community; and establishment of safe and healthy relationships and friendships within the program that enhanced the residents' self-esteem and self-confidence. They also highlighted the key role played by lived experience voices, via the everyday interaction of the lived experience worker with residents and the feedback from the formal Lived Experience Advisory Committee, in shaping the program design and implementation (Going, 2024).

Staff reported that employment connections were often facilitated through Bridge It's formal relationships with other organisations whose personnel understand the specific needs of their residents. Particular reference was made to a supportive organisation that trains people in hospitality:

They have cafes and hospitality training programmes. So, they actually pay the young people to participate in the training and then they can work at their cafes. But you've got bosses and managers who are also supportive and come from a youth work background or approach. (Going, 2024: p. 30)

Similarly, staff emphasised the value of the friendships fostered throughout the Cocoon program. This was often raised with reference to the importance of the residents developing safe and healthy relationships, given that many came from backgrounds of trauma that had previously impeded forming constructive relationships. One participant summed this up as follows:

We've had quite a few young women come in and say that they've never had a friend before. (Going, 2024: p. 33)

Overall, the two forms of data collection documented the efficacy of the Cocoon in enhancing the social and community connections of the young participants as a means of advancing their core housing, health, education and employment outcomes. They also emphasised the active role played by lived experience voices in advancing a genuinely co-designed model of service delivery (Going, 2024).

Study Three

The internal evaluation involved interviews with 19 residents across the two phases from Pilot to Cocoon 2.0. The first small set of interviews reported positive outcomes in areas such as housing stability and associated personal wellbeing, access to further and higher education, establishment of personal friendships and development of independent living skills. However, there were mixed results in mental health and social connectedness, suggesting a need for expanded post-transition outreach programs to advance sustainable mental health supports and peer connections (Morris, 2025).

The second set of interviews also reported positive findings based on both qualitative interview data and survey data collected by Bridge It. The latter included demographic data from 19 different young people at the time of the third data collection point (not including the pilot young people). For example, 11/16 participants were engaged in education (i.e. both TAFE and university degrees), and six were employed. There was also evidence of enhanced independent living skills in areas such as cooking and budgeting, and improved social connectedness. Residents particularly valued

the availability of therapeutic supports such as art therapy, yoga and mentoring, the presence of a wellness nurse to help with health care, and assistance to access education and employment opportunities (i.e. via scholarships, resume preparation and job applications). Overall, the evaluation identified the value of combining secure housing with strong personalised support interventions (Morris, 2025).

Residents reported that the program strongly enabled education progression, employment readiness and personal growth as follows:

I achieved a lot here, like getting into university and job applications. I'm really proud of myself.

I feel like I'm able to become the woman I want here, because it's such a nurturing place. (Morris, 2025: p. 5)

However, the study also reported problematic manifestations of interpersonal conflict among residents, such as incidences of bullying, racism and transphobia. There were also some delays in accessing mental health services. For example, one resident commented:

I feel safer now. But when the person who was making a lot of trouble was here, I was locking my door every night, and I was just scared of attack or something. (Morris, 2025: p. 4)

The third set of interviews also reported positive outcomes based again on both qualitative interview data and survey data collected by Bridge It. The latter included demographic data from 19 different young people at the time of the third data collection point (not including the pilot young people). For example, 11/18 participants were actively engaged in education and six were employed. There was very positive feedback on activities to support education, training and employment pathways. There was also evidence of positive life skills development in areas such as budgeting and cooking, enhanced social relationships and improved mental health. Additionally, cultural appreciation practices, such as themed cooking sessions, were valued. However, some interpersonal conflicts remained, including instances of bullying, and housing outcomes revealed a mixture of smooth transitions and examples of continued housing instability or homelessness (Morris, 2025).

The combined data from the three discrete studies indicates the effectiveness of the Cocoon program model (incorporating a lived experience mentor, various therapeutic interventions and continued outreach support after residents leave the home) in enabling positive outcomes for the young women in key areas such as housing, education and employment, mental health, life skills, social and community relationships and family reunification. Some challenges remain around upskilling and supporting the residents to be able to manage interpersonal conflict and boundaries and become more aware of their rights, and also in assisting them to build strategies for responding to disagreements that don't include bullying, discrimination, racism, transphobia, or generally being mean to others. Another challenge is ensuring that the gains made while living in the home are maintained once the residents transition into independent living.

Discussion

Bridge It assists a highly vulnerable population, all members of whom have histories of childhood trauma, have exited from residential and other forms of out-of-home care and have experienced family violence and/or homelessness. Several of their cohort also come from either First Nations or refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds, or have diagnosed disability. Nevertheless, the three studies discussed in this paper concur that the Cocoon model has successfully enabled positive transitions to stable housing, active engagement with education, training and employment, and positive social relationships and community connections, creating sustainable social capital.

Accessing safe and affordable housing has been identified internationally as a key factor for advancing the wellbeing of care leavers. Equally, there is increasing recognition of the value of co-design perspectives in enhancing program supports (Kelly et al., 2025). The uniquely co-designed approach adopted by the Cocoon, incorporating the employment of a lived experience mentor and ongoing input from current and former residents into service delivery planning, seems to be effective in enabling care leavers to transition out of the program while retaining a continuing safety net of support from responsible adults.

This paper has some limitations. One is that the studies utilised did not specifically distinguish between the experiences and outcomes of care leavers and other Cocoon residents. Additionally, there may be some overlap between the cohorts analysed in the three separate studies.

Further research would ideally compare the impact of the Cocoon model to other similar independently funded housing support models in Victoria in order to illuminate how the specific gender needs of female residential care leavers (Zhao et al., 2025) differ from those of other care-leaver cohorts across genders and placement types. Additionally, it would be useful to more intensively interrogate how the Cocoon model supports sub-groups of care leavers with specific needs, such as First Nations youth, those from refugee or asylum seeker backgrounds and those with disability.

In conclusion, our study highlights the importance of stable and supportive housing being provided to young adults transitioning from residential OOH that enhances their living skills, education and employment opportunities, and wider social and community connections. The Cocoon model seems to be particularly effective in advancing what has been called 'interdependence', that is, the advancement of ongoing supportive social networks and relationships for care leavers that enable sustainable social capital, rather than abrupt transitions to self-reliant independence (Zhao & Waugh, 2025). There is a strong case for the Victorian State Government, and indeed other Australian state and territory governments, to provide dedicated housing funding so that the effective Cocoon model can be upscaled to assist all residential care leavers requiring ongoing housing and other supports.

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Conflicts of interest

None.

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AI transparency statement

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